

Thick-billed Longspur

Rhynchophanes mccownii

By John C. Carlson

All prairie and plains birds have evolved unique ways of projecting their songs in the windy, open environment. But thick-billed longspurs have a particularly stylish and captivating way of delivering their distinctive territorial tune. Rising from the open, dry prairie, the male pushes himself high into the sky with deep strokes of his long wings. Reaching the zenith, he pitches his wings back, locks them straight out, and begins to sing *see see see me see me hear me hear me see*. Floating downward through the wind like a feathered parachute, he continues singing until reaching the ground, when he heads back into the sky to begin the territorial display all over again.

APPEARANCE

Male thick-billed longspurs are light gray with a white face, black cap, and black “moustache.” They have a wide black band across the breast set off with a chestnut shoulder patch. In shades of brown, the female is a paler version of the male. The tail of both sexes is white, with a “T” formed by a black central tail feather and the black tips of the outer tail feathers.

REPRODUCTION

The males arrive in Montana in late April from the high plains of the American Southwest and begin setting up territories. When females arrive a short time later, courtship begins. On the ground, the male prances in a circle around the female, occasionally raising his wings straight into the air to flash the white lining, all the while pouring forth an ecstatic song. After the female chooses her mate, she builds a grass nest in a small depression in the ground. Usually around mid-May, she lays three or four white eggs with heavy brown or purplish brown markings. She incubates the eggs for 12 days, and the nestlings leave the nest

John C. Carlson is a wildlife biologist for the federal Bureau of Land Management in Glasgow.

10 days after hatching. Thick-billed longspurs primarily eat grasshoppers during the summer and feed on grass and weed seeds during the winter.

HABITAT

Thick-billed longspurs are birds of grasslands with very little grass. Historically, this type of mostly barren grassland was found in patches throughout the North American interior. Certain types of soils, heavy grazing by bison and locusts, periodic wildfire, and severe drought combined to create patches of short, sparse grass. As bison were killed, locusts reduced, and fires tamed, most of the prairie bald spots disappeared, and with them most thick-billed longspurs. However, because occasional droughts continue and the special soils remain, the birds still have remnant breeding habitat in open prairie characterized by buttes, gumbo, short grasses, and prickly pear cacti.

RANGE

Thick-billed longspurs historically bred throughout the prairies of the northern Great Plains, from Minnesota west to the Rocky Mountain Front, north into prairie Canada, and south to Wyoming and Oklahoma. Due primarily to the conversion of prairies to agricultural fields, the species is no longer found in Minnesota, Manitoba, or Oklahoma, and distribution is limited in the western Dakotas. Montana appears to be the species’ remaining stronghold. Thick-billed longspurs are found throughout the state’s eastern half, in appropriate

habitat, as well as in high, sparse grasslands in mountain valleys of Montana’s southwestern region.

MANAGEMENT

Thick-billed longspurs are a species of concern in Montana and are on the national watch list of species that have the potential to become federally listed as threatened. Converting native prairie to cropland can reduce thick-billed longspur populations. The transcontinental Partners in Flight bird management plan recommends that the best way to conserve thick-billed longspurs is to preserve native shortgrass prairie, especially in areas of sparsely vegetated hills. 🐾



ALAN G. NELSON